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BACKGROUNDER 1-0093  
ANITA CHAPMAN

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INDIAN CENSORSHIP GOES INTO LAW

ANNCR:

THE INDIAN PRESS BUILT OVER THE YEARS A REPUTATION FOR LIVELINESS AND THOUGHTFULNESS. BUT IN THE PAST MONTHS IT HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY CHANGES OUTSIDE ITS CONTROL, AS WE HEAR IN THIS REPORT FROM VOA'S ANITA CHAPMAN:

VOICE:

CENSORSHIP OF INDIA'S PRIVATELY-OWNED PRESS, THAT BEGAN WITH THE STATE OF EMERGENCY LAST JUNE, WAS EXPECTED TO BE A TEMPORARY MEASURE. THE GOVERNMENT INDICATED RESTRICTIONS WOULD BE LIFTED ONCE THE NATIONAL EMERGENCY ENDED.

SOME LEADING INDIAN JOURNALISTS LOOKED FOR RELIEF FOLLOWING ACQUITTAL OF THE PRIME MINISTER IN NOVEMBER ON MINOR ELECTION LAW CHARGES. THEY WERE THEREFORE DISAPPOINTED, AND ALARMED, WHEN IN EARLY DECEMBER STEPS WERE TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO EXTEND CONTROL OVER THE PRESS INTO THE INDEFINITE FUTURE. NEW REGULATIONS ISSUED AT THE TIME, IN THE FORM OF EXECUTIVE ORDINANCES, DISBANDED THE TEN YEAR OLD PRESS COUNCIL, LIFTED THE IMMUNITY OF PARLIAMENTARY REPORTERS, AND FORBADE PUBLICATION IN PAMPHLETS, MAGAZINES OR NEWSPAPERS, OF OBJECTIONABLE MATERIAL. THIS WAS DEFINED AS ANYTHING LIKELY TO CAUSE DISAFFECTION TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT OR ITS LEADERS.

THIS WEEK THE EXECUTIVE ORDERS WILL BECOME LAW, AND WILL CONTINUE IN EFFECT AFTER THE EMERGENCY-IMPOSED CENSORSHIP ENDS. THE LEGISLATION PASSED THE LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT LAST THURSDAY AND ROUTINE APPROVAL IS EXPECTED IN THE UPPER HOUSE THIS WEEK.

THE NEW LEGISLATION IS INTENDED TO ASSURE, IN THE GOVERNMENT'S WORDS, THAT THE MONOPOLY PRESS DOES NOT HAVE A LEVER TO PRESSURE THE GOVERNMENT. CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT ACTIONS IS TO BE PERMITTED, THOUGH IT MUST BE MADE IN A CONSTRUCTIVE MANNER. OPPOSITION LEADERS ARE SCEPTICAL, HOWEVER, THAT ANY AGREED-ON DEFINITION CAN BE FOUND OF WHAT IS OBJECTIONABLE OR WHAT THE LIMITS OF CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICS ARE.

IN THIS COUNTRY, THE OPPOSITION LEADERS' CONCERN WAS ECHOED BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. IT CALLED THE NEW LEGISLATION THE "MOST CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE YET" THAT THE SUSPENSION OF LIBERTIES CALLED TEMPORARY LAST JUNE MAY IN FACT BECOME PERMANENT.

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